

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1ABALTIMORE SUN
12 March 1986

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Reagan firm on quick aid for 'contras'

Rejects compromise plan to delay package 6 months

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan yesterday ruled out a compromise proposal that would have postponed military aid for Nicaraguan insurgents for six months, but hinted that he might be open to a delay of shorter duration to allow for a last-ditch U.S. diplomatic effort to encourage talks between the pro-Soviet Sandinista government and the "contra" rebels.

Administration officials said, however, that any substantial movement toward compromise on the proposed \$100 million contra aid package was unlikely to materialize until after the White House assessed the impact of the president's nationally televised speech on Nicaragua Sunday night, three days before a crucial showdown vote in the House.

Earlier, at a breakfast meeting with reporters and editors of *The Sun*, White House communications director Patrick J. Buchanan said the administration's legislative strategy, admittedly confrontational, was to serve notice on senators and congressmen that they would have to defend their

vote on contra aid at election time.

Mr. Buchanan brushed off congressional criticism of his combative rhetoric last week, much of it directed at his charge in a *Washington Post* op-ed piece that seemed to portray Democratic opponents of the aid package as communist dupes.

"Everybody is going to have to be held accountable for how they vote and I don't think they're going to be able to say that . . . the reason I voted against aid for the contras . . . is because in the 34th paragraph of an op-ed piece by Pat Buchanan two weeks before that there was an implication I didn't like," he said. "That won't fly. People are going to need reasons for this, not excuses."

President Reagan, speaking to out-of-town reporters at the White House, rejected congressional criticism of his proposal, which calls for \$70 million in military aid and \$30 million in non-lethal logistical support, calling it "all the usual temporizing and quibbles."

He warned that any reduction in his request or delay in providing it could amount to providing the contras — or "freedom fighters," as he calls them — with "too little, too late."

"Those who would compromise must not compromise the freedom fighters' lives nor their immediate defensive needs," he said. "They must not compromise Latin America's democracies or our own southern borders. They must not compromise freedom."

Mr. Reagan was less rigid, however, when asked whether compromise of any sort was possible, saying, "I'll listen to any proposal that anyone wants to make that is tied to the idea of letting us come to the aid of these contras."

He went on to say that the only proposal he had heard involved a "long period of time, and then wasn't a sure thing." He indicated that he found such a plan unacceptable because "it would destroy the morale of the contras, and they would be asked to live through a great period of time with no assurance they were ever going to get the funds."

A senior administration official said later that the president's remarks applied specifically to a proposal advanced by Sen. Jim Sasser, D-Tenn., that would delay military aid for six months to allow for further diplomatic initiatives and would require a second congressional vote to release the money.

The official said the administration was not currently considering compromise, although he conceded that "all sorts of things are being discussed" with Congress, suggesting that both sides were exploring areas of possible agreement.

On Capitol Hill, Mr. Sasser said another compromise proposal under discussion, in which the president would pledge in a letter to seek diplomatic solutions in Nicaragua, would not win over Congress because Mr. Reagan had a "credibility problem."

"It is certainly not acceptable, given the administration's record in the past," he said, citing a similar pledge last year on the aid issue that many members of Congress feel the president did not honor.

Mr. Sasser said there was discussion in Congress of a "fig leaf" option: to delay military aid for two months while negotiations were attempted but automatically release the aid to

the rebels at the end of that time.

Meanwhile, Sen. Dave Durenberger, R-Minn., chairman of the intelligence committee that oversees the contra program, said he would not support military aid to the rebels and sharply criticized administration policy.

"The president has not been right on Nicaragua," he said. "The president's chances of being right this time are at best 50-50."

Mark O. Hatfield, R-Ore., chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, and Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., vice-chairman of the intelligence panel, also opposed the aid plan, saying the money could be better spent on domestic programs that the president wants to cut sharply.

Mr. Leahy and Representative Michael D. Barnes, D-Md., 8th, chairman of the House subcommittee on western hemisphere affairs, also said that the president's plan would lift current limits on the CIA's role in the rebels' military actions.

The president's proposal "allows the CIA back in the covert war business," Mr. Leahy said, noting that the last time the agency had a free hand it helped mine Nicaragua harbors.

Mr. Barnes said the aid plan would also allow immediate use of a multimillion-dollar CIA contingency fund, amounting to "a blank check for further expenditures" for the rebels beyond the \$100 million. Mr. Leahy said he thought the fund could not be used until the end of this fiscal year.

At the White House, Edward Djerjian, deputy press secretary, said the administration was not seeking to dip into the contingency fund.

In the House, Democratic leaders predicted the aid plan would lose, with 200 to 220 Democrats and at least 10 Republicans voting against it. Said House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., D-Mass.: "There is no compromise, as far as I am concerned, on this issue."